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ABSTRACT

The possibility of converting a vacated school building into a useful resource presents a community with an interesting situation. During a 5-year period ending in 1997, over 100 rural Illinois communities encountered this situation. This report explores what happens to vacant school buildings and offers case studies of various re-uses, new ownership, and funding mechanisms. Basic concerns and challenges of the conversion process are whether the school building has value, what type of use is most appropriate, who the developers are, and how the conversion process works. Survey responses from 22 regional offices of education in nonmetropolitan Illinois counties reported 25 closed buildings with 19 converted to other uses. Case studies were developed on the conversion projects identified. School buildings have been converted to housing, commercial purposes, and community centers. Not one of the conversions was reported as a failure. Respondents most frequently defined a successful conversion as filling a need within the community or increasing the local tax base. A comparison to conversions in earlier decades shows that as vacated school buildings are larger now, a more sophisticated conversion process and greater expertise are needed. This increased complexity also requires a public commitment to enabling and supporting conversions until they can become financially self-sufficient. (SV)

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Conversion of School Buildings in Rural Illinois Communities

by Ann M. Liebenstein[1]

The possibility of converting a vacated school building into a useful resource presents a community with an interesting situation. During a five-year period, over 100 rural Illinois communities were presented with this situation when school buildings were vacated. When old schools are converted, the new uses are as varied as the needs of the communities. Examples include daycare centers, antique malls, senior assisted living units, city halls, community centers, grain storage facilities, churches, and business incubators.

Although exact figures are not available, a comparison of downstate, rural schools open in 1991 and in 1997 revealed 114 fewer school buildings (Illinois State Board of Education 1992, 1997). A continual decline in the school-age population in many rural areas and increased curriculum demands make it difficult for small schools to offer the breadth of programs and academic exposure expected and required. More recently, physical requirements, including accessibility, computerization, and special laboratories and equipment may be cost prohibitive for small schools. These factors indicate that school buildings could continue to close into the next decade and more communities will face the question of what to do with vacated school buildings.

At the same time, communities undertaking community and economic development are inventorying vacant buildings and strategic properties for their re-use potential. Old schools may not be included in these listings. This report explores what happens to vacant school buildings and offers case studies of different re-uses, new ownership, and funding mechanisms. It examines whether school facilities offer the potential for conversion and what factors are considered in determining and realizing that potential.

Project Overview

In 1997, a questionnaire was sent to 29 Regional Offices of Education (ROEs) in nonmetro counties in Illinois. Of the 22 responses, 12 regions reported school buildings had been closed between 1991 and 1997 and 10 reported no closings. The surveys showed 25 closed buildings with 19 converted to other uses. Case studies were developed on the conversion projects identified.

Telephone conversations with school district officials, city government staff, and private developers in each of the conversion projects offered insight into the range of new uses and conversion processes. General information was gathered on another 30 projects, but specifics were not pursued. To gain a better understanding of the issues, a literature search was undertaken and telephone interviews were held with contacts from the Illinois State Board of Education, the American Institute of Architects, Western Illinois University, University of Illinois, and University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.

This research, while not exhaustive, suggests the following common patterns:

- Smaller school buildings are generally easier for a local developer in a small community to successfully convert to another use.
- Large communities have more latitude regarding the kinds of re-uses available and the economic feasibility.
- If the re-use is for nonschool purposes, the school board/administration is generally not involved beyond the initial sale of the building.
- Involvement by city staff enables more complex, often multi-use, projects to be developed.

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- Re-use as a community facility requires a major and continued financial commitment by the public and strong, dedicated volunteer leadership.
- Schools receive the highest compensation when facilities are sold to a private developer who bases the bid primarily on the value of the site and its development potential.

This report examines three basic concerns and challenges of the conversion process based on the survey results and related research: (1) Does the school building have value? (2) What type of use is most appropriate? (3) Who are the developers and how does the conversion process work? Highlights from the survey of ROEs are noted in bold with checkpoints (✔) throughout the paper.

Does the School Building Have Value?

The notion of a vacated school building's "value" seems to differ among the school board, developer, city staff, and the general public:

✔ **Financial information was reported for eight buildings. Five of these were sold outright at "fair market value." Only one partnership was reported where the school district maintained building ownership.**

The financial value of a school or the price paid seemed to be of interest mainly to the private developer. Most school administrators admitted worrying more about value in terms of money needed for ongoing maintenance and insurance after the building was closed. A vocal general public often measured value in terms of memories, community identity, hours of volunteer labor, and common use of facilities. These differences serve as a basis for nearly all of the frustrations and disappointments expressed about school conversions and for strife between the school board/administration and the general public.

Prices received by school districts ranged from $1.00 to $30,000. The buildings and their sites, without doubt, differed in each case, but it is questionable whether these amounts truly reflect the market value. Some confusion about value was caused during campaigns for new school buildings when school boards needed to convince the public of the poor condition of the existing building to ensure passage of a bond issue. With this as a background, how might a community interested in pursuing conversion establish a realistic value for its former school building?

Architects suggested examining value by asking why the building was abandoned and whether that had ramifications for other potential uses. Most of the conversions were of "condemned" buildings, but this is not indicative of value if the cost of repairs exceeded the cost of new construction. Closures were not all due to the condition of the building. Four were closed because of failure to meet code requirements and seven were structurally adequate, but closed due to reorganization.

The issue of condition is in no way reflected in the variation in prices received for subsequent development. In fact, the highest price was paid for a building that was demolished and replaced by new rental housing because the site was more valuable than the structure. In another case, a minimum price (less than $5,000) was paid and the building was renovated into unique and expensive condominiums that reflected the character of the old school.

In certain cases, an objective consultation and evaluation process might help to eliminate discrepancies between the perceptions of value assigned by various groups and the realities of development. The American Institute of Architects and Illinois State Board of Education staff suggested consultation with a local architect who could offer valuable perspectives on potential future uses of the building. Although many buildings are closed because of code violations, school codes are more stringent and actively enforced than those for other uses. Lack of a state building code makes conversions confusing and local architects are the most knowledgeable resources on the requirements for different uses.

An example of changing codes is obvious in requirements regarding the presence of asbestos. It is now understood that if the asbestos is not friable, it is best to leave it in place, perhaps cover it but leave it undisturbed. This new understanding and prescription represent substantial savings for a developer. The treatment may also vary depending on the eventual use of the building. A conversion project in Sullivan is an example in which the developer changed his perspective on the value of the building and grounds. The school building included asbestos and had been condemned.

Old School Market, Sullivan (pop. 4,354). In 1996, a local family purchased the school in Sullivan with the intention of demolishing the building and constructing a fast-food restaurant. On closer inspection, the new owners found that the 14-room, brick building was in excellent structural condition, a visible landmark in the community, fully accessible on the first floor, and lent itself well to a retail scheme.

An informal market study supported a decision to rehabilitate the building as an Amish marketplace. This use capitalizes on the location at a busy intersection of two main highways which run through a popular tourist area—Lake Shelbyville and the Amish communities. The building, re-opened for retail use within five months from purchase, has evolved from an

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antique consignment shop to primarily a craft shop featuring local handwork. In 1997, application was made to the city for Tax Increment Financing (TIF) monies to help create a 200-seat, family-style, Amish restaurant by expanding the school kitchen and multipurpose area. Tourist traffic has been better than expected, allowing replacement of the original heating system and inclusion of air conditioning. ♦

In Sullivan, the school was evaluated for re-use in two ways—the building and its site. Each offered potentially different uses. The evaluation process involved determining a "highest and best use" for the resource, requiring developers of private conversion projects and school building officials to consider many aspects of the building. These included the structural soundness of roof and building, utility systems, heating plant, any code violations, general size and layout of the facility, appropriateness for subdivision, accessibility, and architectural significance.

The location of the Sullivan Old School Market is one key to its success. Both the characteristics of the building lot and its location within the community lend value to the school. In a similar evaluation, the contractor who converted the elementary school site in Marion decided to demolish the building.

Apartment Development, Marion (pop. 14,800). After the elementary school building in Marion was vacated and condemned, the school administration auctioned off the furnishings. The highest bid for the site and the 1912, three-story brick school was $30,000, which was based on a decision to demolish the building. When demolition began, bricks were set aside for local residents as a memento of the old school. The school was located in a quiet neighborhood several blocks from the nearest collector or commercial street. The construction company followed the zoning ordinance that reflected the city's plans for use of the site for housing and developed 12 single-story, brick duplex units on the six-acre site. The units, rented at market-rate and considered high-end, enjoy a low vacancy rate. ♦

As in the Marion example, the site is sometimes as valuable, if not more so, than the structure. The site may also be evaluated for future development by applying common real estate concepts of size and zoned capacity for development, access for cars or pedestrians, location and visibility, surrounding uses, and market value without the building.

Mt. Auburn also decided that the site was more valuable than the structure and chose to demolish the former high school, but for different reasons than in Marion. Mt. Auburn is a small, rural community that is currently not growing in either population or economic base. Acknowledgment of this reality guided the community decision.

Monument, Mt. Auburn (pop. 544). Declining enrollments in then Mt. Auburn High School forced consolidation with the Taylorville School District. Simultaneously, the school building was condemned for code violations, an antiquated coal furnace, buckled hardwood floors, and accessibility problems. The school board used remaining monies to demolish the school building based on its previous experience of an abandoned elementary school being vandalized for more than 30 years. After demolition, the lots were subdivided and sold to local residents thus placing them on the tax rolls. A monument using the cornerstone of the high school was erected in the local park. Former students purchased bricks inscribed with their names and dates of graduation to pave the plaza in front of the monument. The site of the old high school was subdivided and the first new home was constructed in 1997, with the second of the planned 16 lots under construction. ♦

Sometimes a building is not viable for re-use due to structural problems, design, or sheer size in comparison to the host community. Mt. Auburn residents admitted that they could not financially support the old building in another capacity and felt the community had little chance of attracting a major developer to finance a conversion. They chose to demolish the building immediately before it could become an eyesore and a target for vandalism, thereby saving in maintenance and insurance dollars, as well as preventing possible crime and maintaining community pride.

What Type of Use Is Most Appropriate?

This section discusses the decision regarding public versus private re-uses, the views of residents, and their role in establishing a new use for the old schools. Despite the straightforward school board approach to the abandonment and outright sale of school buildings, the case studies reveal many examples of intense involvement by communities. Although many emotional appeals were made to keep the schools open, of more interest is the fact that a majority of creative ideas for public re-use of the buildings came from private citizens. These citizens not only established that the re-use would be public, but also the specific program to be served. Often, volunteers became developers as illustrated in the spotlight on Wapella.

The relationship between the community and its school is based on the community's investment in time, energy, and monies in the school and its facilities. It is only natural that

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the community seek to keep the school in public service. Nachtigal (1994) noted a direct link between rural communities and schools:

> Traditionally, the school is the center of small town activities. It is a source of community identity as school patrons rally around athletic events. Plays, musical events, and sports provide a major source of entertainment. School news, for better or for worse, provides the basis for much of the social dialog in the community. In many rural communities the school also represents the largest economic enterprise .... Maintaining and operating the public school represents the major investment of the community's local tax dollars. (p. 1)

The strength of the school–community relationship is further illustrated in Wapella and, in a different way, in Belvidere. The case studies show residents assign a tremendous value to a school building, especially the gym and auditorium which are often the most active public spaces in town. The public concerns and activism focus mainly on keeping the building in public service, thus filling some perceived community need. This was the basis for most of the private or quasi-public, nonprofit conversion efforts.

Community Center, Wapella (pop. 696). A citizens group organized and rallied to re-use the gym and accompanying newer classrooms when the elementary school building in Wapella was to be abandoned. Much to the surprise of neighbors who supported closing the school, this group asked that the rest of the school be demolished. Using donations and the few grants they were able to amass, the remaining few classrooms have been converted into a kitchen and restrooms, and the smaller structure now serves as an active community center. Programming is ongoing with a focus on youth of all ages. The residents are adamant that the building will remain in public use but are also realistic in understanding how much the community can afford to support it in the long run. ♦

Conversions are rarely financially self-supporting and some unit of local government must become involved. Leadership is needed in the beginning to help determine whether resources can be amassed to financially support development and on-going management of the public uses desired. Although these projects begin with significant volunteer support, there are examples where maintaining support has been difficult. In Belvidere, the city played an active role in both determining the new use for the building and dedicating monies to support that use when it was decided that the size of the project required professional leadership. The city has a Community Development Corporation (CDC) with a staff well-versed in creative development and funding strategies. At the prodding of the CDC, Belvidere initiated two conversion projects into uses previously lacking in the community.

Community Building Complex, Boone County (Belvidere, pop. 15,962). Belvidere has an active, professionally staffed CDC serving the city and county. This center, Growth Dimensions, encouraged the city to purchase (for one dollar) the buildings in the high school complex. Newer additions between the main buildings were demolished and separate projects developed for the original school and heating plant and the WPA gymnasium/auditorium/cafeteria building.

The art deco WPA building has been renovated by the city as a community hall for diverse events: dance lessons and formal dances for all ages, concerts featuring local and professional performers, an open stage talent night, and a league for kids who "didn't make the team." Other events needing a large and special setting, such as proms, weddings, and banquets, are hosted in the building. Nearly half of the events are free and open to the public.

The funding methods have been as diverse as the activities. A city bond issue was used for initial capital improvements and then a one-cent food and beverage tax was levied to support ongoing management and programming. This tax will sunset after ten years and other strategies will need to be used to make the facility financially sustainable. One possible strategy is the "affiliates" program that encourages local agencies and businesses to give back something in labor, capital, or furnishings in return for lower rates for usage. Completion of the lower level that will include a catering kitchen and series of meeting rooms is expected to encourage other organizations to become affiliates. ♦

Private developers must often decide what the future use of vacant school buildings will be, independently of public leaderships, based on the economic realities of the community. Each mentioned some formal or informal analysis of their proposed use compared to the market or demand in the community. In Marion, the experienced local contractor saw housing, which was suggested by the zoning ordinance for the site, as an appropriate re-use. His analysis of the local housing market identified an unmet need for a specific type of housing, and he determined how many units could be absorbed by the market and how many would be necessary to support the level of rents needed to finance the project.

Leadership on conversion projects by individual citizens, local organizations, the school administration, city officials, and private developers has made the difference between a vacant building and an active re-use of school property. In the future, the presence of strong leadership with experience and skill in development will become more critical.

A comparison of older conversion projects to those of the 1990s shows a progression of complexity. In the 1950s and 1960s, many one-room schools were abandoned; these could be easily converted to single-family housing, small office space, or manufacturing uses. In the 1970s and 1980s, many smaller, turn-of-the-century schools were vacated, managed by local contractors, and absorbed into the local

market. Now, the vacant buildings are both newer and larger, often requiring more sophisticated development schemes and financing to make conversion work. Sparta provides an example of the broad mix of uses and scale of recent and future school conversions.

Olde Country School, Sparta (pop. 4,853). The local school district vacated the 70,000 square foot, 1940s, brick middle school and had plans to demolish it. When they learned that it would cost $700,000 to demolish, properly dispose of the debris, and reclaim the 3.5 acre site, they put it out for public bid. The bid was won by a family group not previously experienced as developers. Within six months, after some cosmetic work in the old part of the school, it was reopened as a consignment shop for 60-70 antique dealers. Since then, the developers have built offices in a newer wing which are rented at a below market rate but help defray the high operating costs of the antiquated utilities for the entire complex. The family converted a space on the second floor for an apartment and has plans to develop other residential units. Other activities currently housed in the building are numerous and varied, including a deli, daycare, open basketball in the gymnasium, miscellaneous community events, an annual quilt show, practice sessions for local bands, and a bluegrass club, to name a few. ♦

The initial phases of the project required financial assistance from the city, school, and the TIF district. The building still uses a coal burner and loses some business for lack of air conditioning. The involvement of development professionals in the sale and conversion of this building may well have made the project easier for the developer. The trend toward greater complexity and sheer size begs the question, "Must the process for sale of school buildings change to reflect the growing complexity of the buildings?"

Who Are the Developers and How Does the Conversion Process Work?

The survey of ROEs showed that schools retain and re-use very few of the closed buildings. The minimal number retained are left vacant or are used as administrative offices, units of special education, or storage. These uses are perhaps the easiest to implement and were recommended by education officials as the first to be considered. Another survey checkpoint notes the following:

✔ **Post-conversion ownership was evenly split between public and private sectors. Of the 15 buildings for which we have information, four are owned by private, for-profit organizations and three by private, nonprofit groups, with school districts maintaining ownership of only two. The rest are under the jurisdiction of various government agencies—city, county, and township.**

Perhaps the ideal situation is outright sale of a school building to a local family at fair market value. This process, involving only the school district and one family, was the scenario in Savannah where a couple purchased a school building to use the newest addition for a family business. The older section is used as an opera performance space at which concerts for the community are held. Not all communities are fortunate enough to have a local family able and willing to purchase a school for their own use and the continued enjoyment of the community.

The public, city government, or citizen group may become the developer if they have the funds to support both conversion and long-term management and maintenance. Mulkeytown is another example of a strong community where a local nonprofit organization has maintained public access to the local school. The wide range of activities was established by a local organization, and strong leadership and the support of volunteers have contributed to the project's success. The greatest challenge to continued success is the need for funds.

Historical Museum, Mulkeytown (pop. 380). When the grade school—the only remaining school building in Mulkeytown—was about to close, a local history buff inquired whether the school might be developed as a local museum. It was not legal to transfer the building directly to a private organization, so the township board purchased the school for one dollar and transferred it tax-free to the West Franklin Historical Society. The school has 28 rooms, plus gym/auditorium and former kitchen. The roof had leaked, destroying the gym floor and all but the four newer classrooms. Thus, the immediate need was for a new roof, and $11,000 was raised from private donations to accomplish the initial work. High school students were enlisted to paint the exterior, and local plumbers and electricians donated services providing parts at cost.

The next focus for the group is seeking grants as monies are needed to restore the gym for basketball, along with a small kitchen and new heating unit. Despite those needs, the building is active. The four newer classrooms have historical exhibits from each of the 12 communities consolidated into the Christopher School District. The hallways are lined with high school class photos from as far back as the 1940s and the many athletic and scholarship trophies earned while the school was in operation. The Historical Society Office doubles as a genealogical center, with genealogical classes held twice each week. Other rooms house exhibits, a household museum, an old-classroom museum, and a community meeting room that is already well-used.

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The school sits on 4.5 acres at the edge of town. A little league uses the ballfield and the grass continues to be mowed, free of charge, by the former school custodian. Neighborhood children use the old play equipment and fundraisers for the project are community events. ♦

Several cases have outlined the role of a public agency in the conversion of school buildings and situations in which success required city support. Yet, when did the city become active in the process? In the survey, ROEs noted the following:

✔ **The city government was not active in the school conversion projects. In five responses to this question, three said the city played no role, one listed the city as a partner, and in one the city had convened a citizen advisory panel.**

The perception of the schools is that the city is not involved in conversion projects. However, the survey also showed that many of the converted buildings remained in public ownership. Other research suggests that cities are the most active public owners and developers of converted schools. Follow-up interviews with private developers revealed that city governments participated in the major conversion projects at the developer's request following the initial sale. Yet other conversions were entirely managed by the city government. Loves Park is an example of the latter.

Multi-Use, Loves Park (pop. 15,457). The single-level brick building, built as a junior high in 1956, was used as a school building for approximately ten years before the Loves Park District school-age population declined. The building sat empty for several years until the city purchased it and totally renovated the interior to house City Hall, a civic center, and additional rental office space. The ROE became a paying tenant after the city completed a renovation of ten-room wing for its offices. A senior center and bridge club occupy another large area. The gym is in excellent condition and is used for basketball and community activities. A caterer has preparation and serving space in the civic center where numerous conferences are hosted. Parking is ample and the grounds are a park setting with a new veteran's memorial. ♦

Loves Park is an example of the city government taking on a project for its own use. In other case studies, however, it was more common for the city to be active in assisting private developers. A professional city staff is able to identify and help leverage monies, offer TIF incentives, or access state and federal programs that may subsidize larger, private projects. Proactivity on behalf of the local government is especially important to the success of increasingly large-scale or mixed-use conversions. One example is the senior housing project in Belvidere.

Senior, Assisted Living Center, Belvidere (pop. 15,962). Growth Dimensions, the proactive and professionally staffed CDC, was involved in the conversion of the WPA Community Center. After the WPA building was separated from the complex, the school buildings were put up for public bid and three contracts were awarded in the course of seven years while the school stood vacant and unmaintained. Each of those developers failed and the building reverted back to the city. In 1997, a contract for development was awarded to a Minneapolis firm specializing in school conversions. The community is reportedly "ecstatic" with the proposed 57-unit senior, assisted living center now under construction.

Growth Dimensions credited designation of the building to the National Register and eligibility for historical monies with making the difference for this project. The developer also is experienced with the challenges of old schools and knows what is feasible. The high school has been stripped of its many newer additions and stands as the original three-story brick structure. A separate, smaller power plant will also house a few residential units.

The funding for this conversion included: A first mortgage; HOME program funds (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development) and housing tax credits (Illinois Affordable Housing Program) both allocated through the Illinois Housing Development Authority; historic preservation tax credits through the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency; and TIF monies through the City of Belvidere. Eleven of the units will be rented at market rate with the rest subsidized. There will be a part-time site manager to run a social program and coordinate service of two meals per day from an off-site source. The wide hallways, common areas, high ceilings, and huge windows have been preserved, maintaining much of the original character. The waiting list for units has surpassed 200 as local seniors clamor to get back into the school. ♦

Belvidere housing would not have come to fruition if the local CDC had not insisted that the city purchase the building and hold out for the right use to meet community needs. The process was not easy or fast as they waited out several developers. Separation of the old WPA gym building from the high school was also publicly supported through an initial bond and a tax levy used to support the programming, management, and rehabilitation of the building complex. This is an excellent example of the types of projects and efforts that will be needed in the future when larger and newer schools are abandoned.

Private development is often the most efficient method of conversion. Schools can sell the building outright at public auction, with the value established by the bidding developers. The uses are established by the local market, interests, and skills of the developer. Many nonpublic projects have been accomplished quietly and are seen as successful by their communities when accomplished by a local developer. The public is comfortable knowing the reputation of the local person and sees a return to the community in the new use and placement of the property on the tax rolls.

Unfortunately, the abandonment of a larger, newer school may generate a project too large for local developers and, thus, some backing, if not outright purchase, by a larger development organization is required. Attracting major developers is difficult, time consuming, and beyond the realm of expectation for the local school board and administration. In fact, it is a task for community development agencies with full-time professional staff. This may be the most compelling reason for schools and local governments to work closely on the closing and conversion of school buildings. The School Facilities Council cautions that "the selling of a school building is a specialized task which should be handled by appropriate people" (Day 1980, p. 21).

Almost as an aside to this development discussion, if it is decided that the building must be razed, all authorities recommend doing it immediately. Allowing a building to remain idle is the least desirable option due to vandalism and rapid deterioration. In terms of public relations, to mothball a school invites open criticism of school officials (Day 1980). Tours through conversion sites reveal that lack of heat for one winter will destroy most ceilings and plaster. In one community, the electricity supporting the sump pump to keep the furnace dry was shut off when the building was closed; consequently, re-use has nearly been made impossible because of repair costs resulting from such actions.

Similarly, the failure to perform routine maintenance on the roof in the last months of operation caused an entire wing of one school to be lost for re-use. A decision by the community and commitment by the school board/administration to support conversion could avoid such problems with minimal cost to taxpayers.

Conclusions for Enabling Future Conversions

An objective of this research is to address the question, "Is the effort necessary for conversion worthwhile?" When the ROEs were asked about conversions of vacated school facilities, the response was as follows:

✔ **None of the conversions were reported as a failure. Most found the conversions successful or highly successful. The ROEs rated the success as slightly higher from the school perspective than from the community perspective.**

This result should encourage additional re-uses. The processes were not all immediate and simple, yet the final results were seen as beneficial. In addition, the ROEs were asked to determine what the schools perceived as qualifiers of success:

✔ **When asked to define success in converting former school buildings, most respondents noted that the conversion filled a need within the community; the second highest qualifier of success was the increase in the local tax base. Other factors for measuring success included the sale of the building at fair market value, an increase in local jobs, making the building habitable, and receiving community support.**

Results indicate that value is subjective, but no facility or building site is without value. Public and private re-uses may be appropriate, but may require different amounts of investment. Further, whoever undertakes the conversion process will need some skilled assistance whether for financing or for determination of uses. From these findings, three conclusions for future conversions are offered:

(1) Noting the wide variety of activities in former school buildings and their perceived success, it is clear that conversions are desirable. Schools and their communities should be encouraged to re-use school buildings to achieve a community goal, fill an expressed need, or generate tax revenue from a productive new use.

(2) As the buildings being vacated become larger, the need for a more sophisticated process and expertise increases. This suggests that schools and their communities will require outside help and encouragement.

(3) This increased complexity requires a commitment to enabling and supporting conversions until they can become financially self-sufficient.

The first conclusion is self-explanatory. The public paid to build and maintain a facility for many years; if there is any way to extend the life of that investment, it should be pursued. The continued use of the building by the school board is easiest to facilitate. The fulfillment of some public need or goal is desirable, although perhaps costly—requiring the same, continued public subsidy—but may not be possible if a new structure is required. The generation of tax revenues from private use of the building removes it as a burden to the community. The perceptions of a school facility's value needs to match professional evaluations and market realities to guide decisions for re-use.

The second is a call to increase the number of buildings considered for conversion and to elicit broader involvement in the process of abandonment and conversion. This may be more complicated than the current in-house handling of an immediate sale by the schools to whomever is interested, but it may be necessary in attracting developers willing to bid on larger buildings and able to bring a project to completion.

The decision to vacate a school building should initiate discussion on community needs, common goals, and the

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public ability to support renovation and maintenance if continued public use is desired. The challenges to conversion need to be evaluated professionally along with market conditions. The ongoing stewardship of the schools, city expertise, and public energies are all necessary to define the best use and bring it to fruition. A conversion project should pull the community together rather than pulling it apart in distrust and anger.

The third has to do with future conversions. For these to be successful, some level of support is needed. This situation also calls for local development staff to lend expertise in amassing the funding necessary to help developers accomplish their goals. There are roles for the city, school boards, and public in providing this support.

Public leaders must weigh the many re-uses that may be proposed by the community. Most often, they must be willing to find additional monies or volunteer time if the building is to be kept for public use. The costs of demolition of an older building must be weighed against conversion and ongoing public use. If the community seeks to restore it for another use, the costs may exceed those for new construction. The end product may be superior structurally and architecturally, but additional costs may accrue due to the age and condition of the building.

The school board can support potential conversion projects by continuing full maintenance of buildings until sold. Currently, the schools subsidize projects by selling the property for little money. Although this may happen because the building is perceived as having little value, it has made some conversions possible that might not have been had they competed at market prices.

The city government can play a major role by sharing leadership and staff expertise with the school board. Agencies must be creative with local economic development monies and strategies, offer tax breaks if appropriate, and dedicate other tax monies if a community is supportive. If the city has been through a visioning or strategic planning process, this may guide the decision on re-use. If not, they may choose to use the school closing as the issue around which to discuss the community's future.

The conversion of vacant school buildings reinvests community resources. As population patterns and the demands on education continue to change, more school buildings will be vacated. Through planning and cooperation to steward the public investment in school facilities, the impacts can be mitigated. School buildings can be an asset in community and economic development efforts. Thus, the vandalized shells of former schools on central sites in small communities will become an image of the past and innovative conversions a sign of growth and a symbol of community pride.

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